

# How to Prepare for a Successful Interview

Interviewing for a job can be stressful. You want to make a good impression, but there is a lot at stake and you can't always anticipate what will happen. *Will you be asked a question you don't know how to answer? Will you appear nervous?* Remember that interviewing is a skill: you can improve your abilities with preparation and practice. Whether you're interviewing for a new job (or you are selected to interview for the Mandela Washington Fellowship), thorough preparation is the key to success:

## **1. Do Your Research.**

- **Spend some time learning about the company** or organization you're applying to, including its history, mission, and leadership team. If the organization has a blog, news releases, and/or social media channels, be sure to explore them.
- **Investigate the organization from the outside in.** Who are their top competitors? What are the biggest challenges or issues facing the organization? A simple Google search should help you find the information you need.
- If you **know who your interviewer is**, learn about their background and current role ([LinkedIn](#) or other professional networking sites are a good resources for this).

## **2. Anticipate the Questions—and Plan Your Responses.**

- Familiarize yourself with common interview questions in your industry and **think about the single-most important thing that you want to communicate**. Perhaps you want to showcase your creativity, leadership abilities, or versatile skills. Write your responses down so you can study and refine them; when possible, add anecdotes or "proof points" to strengthen your argument. For example, "I am a trusted and reliable manager. Over the past three years, I have gone from managing a team of two direct reports to a team of eight."
- **Perfect your 30-second elevator speech.** Requests such as "Tell me about yourself" or "Walk me through your background" are common at the beginning of an interview; your answer is important because it sets the tone for the rest of the meeting. Your elevator speech should pertain to the job you are applying for only—don't give a detailed breakdown of your resume or share irrelevant details about your personal life. Instead, focus on your passions, skills, and what interests you about the organization to which you are applying. If you don't know where to start, fill out the "Accomplishments and Leadership" section of the [YALI Network Biography Questionnaire](#) [PDF 107 kb]. And remember, keep it short! Thirty seconds is plenty of time to get your key points across.
- Know your strengths and **know how to talk about your weaknesses**. Be prepared to share three or four strengths including examples of how you have demonstrated these skills. For example, "Creative writing is one of my greatest strengths. I studied poetry and six of my stories have been published in fiction magazines." On the contrary, when you talk about your weaknesses, emphasize what you are doing to address and/or improve them. You might say "Public speaking is a challenge for me, but the more I can practice and prepare in advance of a speech, the better I perform."

## **3. Prepare Questions of Your Own.**

- While it may feel strange to "interview" your interviewer, you should always compile a list of

questions prior to the meeting. **Asking questions is another way to demonstrate that you have done your research** and are serious about the opportunity. Need some ideas? Check out our new resource, [Good Questions to Ask During an Interview](#) [PDF 80 kb].

#### 4. Practice, Practice, Practice.

- *Thinking* about how you will answer a question is one thing; saying it aloud is another. **Consider asking a friend to conduct a mock interview**, where they ask questions and you give your best (practiced) responses. A mock interview is a great opportunity to identify your areas for improvement; perhaps you manage an important project at work, but have a hard time explaining your role and what you do. If you can't do a mock interview, try reciting your interview responses in the mirror, or use a recording device to review your speech.
- **Plan how you will approach a question you are unsure how to answer.** It's okay to take a deep breath, repeat a question back, and/or collect your thoughts for a few moments before you respond.

#### 5. Don't Forget to Sleep

- Hours of interview prep can be wasted if you arrive to the meeting feeling tired and sluggish. Make sure you are well rested so you can **impress your interviewer(s) with your energy and clear thoughts**.
- Always dress professionally, bring extra copies of your resume, and leave plenty of time to travel. If you've done the necessary preparation, the interview is yours to ace. Good luck!

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## The Crucial Job Interview

*Forbes* magazine writer Susan Adams, in her column "How to Ace Your Job Interview," advises applicants to research the company before the interview.

She says that before the interview, applicants should write a few notes to help them remember their best stories that describe their experience and three questions to ask the interviewer. When the interview starts they should ask if they can take notes.

After that, she said, the most crucial part of an interview is to convince the hiring manager that they truly want the job. Interviewers don't just look at candidates who have the required skills for the job. They also want candidates who want them.

"Any job requires a full commitment," California shop owner Cynthia Bragdon advises. "If they are aloof in an interview, they will probably be aloof to my customers."

Adams notes that job counselor Win Sheffield advises applicants to prepare stories that illustrate their skills, strengths and accomplishments. Don't brag but do describe specific experiences that

show how you put your skills to work. Talk about the pleasure and pride you experienced overcoming obstacles, he advises.

Adams advises applicants to tell the interviewer how thrilled they would be to work for their organization. Tell the interviewer that of the other offers you are considering, this is your first choice.

Toward the end of the interview, ask where you stand compared with the company's ideal candidate. This reinforces how much you want the job. Then write an enthusiastic follow-up note, Adams says.

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